

Police given new powers to evict Gypsies from sites

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The government yesterday responded to a storm of often media-led pressure by announcing that the police are to be given new powers to evict Gypsies and travellers if they refuse to move on to local authority designated sites.

Ministers also said they would not require every local council to set up official sites for travellers.

At present the police can only evict if there is evidence of abusive behaviour, criminal damage or the presence of six or more vehicles on the site. The powers do not apply if the encampment is on land forming part of the highway.

In a compromise the government has decided the eviction powers will only apply where local authorities have made provision for temporary, transit and emergency stopping sites for travellers who regularly pass through their area.

Ministers hope their propos-

als will ease the cultural clashes between travellers and the community but Andrew Ryder, the secretary of the Labour campaign for travellers rights, said the measures did not go far enough to help travellers.

"It is essential there is a good system of sites available, or else eviction leads to travellers being pushed on from one site to another. Many of the problems are caused by social exclusion from services, and the refusal of councils to give planning permission for Gypsies to live on their own land," he said.

The government announced that some money in an existing £17m Gypsy site fund is likely to be rechanneled so councils open up new sites.

Mr Ryder also pointed out that Labour had condemned the decision of the Conservative government eight years ago to remove the obligation on councils to provide sites as reckless and spiteful.

In January, the official government count found that 2,774 caravans — or 20% of all British

Gypsy caravans — were on unauthorised encampments. The survey showed 326 more families were on unauthorised sites than in January 2001, without guaranteed access to water, toilets and schooling.

The package, jointly announced by the Home Office and the office of the deputy prime minister yesterday, is designed to meet the continuing complaints that travellers ruin the local landscape, leave litter and behave anti-socially.

The plan — vague in parts — appears to have been rushed out ahead of a private members bill to be debated next week and sponsored by the Conservative MP for Bournemouth East, David Atkinson. The Tory-led bill is likely to be more generous to travellers than government policy, but would also underline ministerial failure to come up with its own response.

The government acknowledged that disputes between councils and police over responsibility often leave com-

munities angry at the failure of anyone to intervene. Many Tory MPs have claimed the police probably have adequate powers to remove trespassers, but do not use them.

Even Labour MPs, such as Bill Rammell, MP for Harlow, have called for travellers, rather than council tax payers to be made liable for damage caused during an illegal occupation. Guidance on managing unauthorised camping, including the proper disposal of waste, will be published in the autumn.

The guidance will emphasise the "same standards of behaviour and regard for the law are expected from all sectors of the community, including regard for public health and waste".

Gypsies claim the problem of the lack of sites is compounded by their inadequate quality. Many of 325 local authority Gypsy sites in England are often near rubbish dumps, sewage works or noisy industrial facilities. It has been claimed they epitomise the definition of a ghetto.